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TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

"Military Deterrence in an Era of Strategic Competition: A Conversation with HON Christine E. Wormuth, 25th U.S. Secretary of the Army"

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FEATURING

Christine E. Wormuth

U.S. Secretary of the Army

CSIS EXPERTS

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Suzanne Spaulding: Good morning. I'm Suzanne Spaulding. I'm senior advisor here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where I lead the Defending Democratic Institutions Project. I'm sitting in today for the director of our Smart Women, Smart Power Program, Dr. Kathleen McInnis. And I am so pleased to have this opportunity to have a conversation with our honored guest, the 25th secretary of the Army, the Honorable Christine E. Wormuth.

Secretary Christine E. Wormuth: Great to be here.

Ms. Spaulding: Before we get started, though, I do want to take a minute to thank our supporters over at Citi. It's because of their generous support that we're able to have these important conversations on critical and timely issues with women leaders and, at the same time, inspiring and cultivating the next generation of leaders.

Our guest today leads the largest branch of the U.S. military, of course, the U.S. Army. As secretary of the Army, she serves as the senior civilian official within the Department of Defense responsible for all matters relating to the U.S. Army. Prior to her current role, Secretary Wormuth was the director of the International Defense and Security Center at the RAND Corporation, and spent many years inside the Obama administration, where she and I overlapped, and I had the great honor and privilege of occasionally working with Secretary Wormuth. At DOD, she served as undersecretary of defense for policy, principal deputy assistant secretary for homeland defense, and then as special assistant to the president and senior director for defense at the National Security Council.

Secretary Wormuth is also a familiar face here at CSIS, where she worked kind of on and off for five years. And we are so happy to have her back here at CSIS, even if just for 30 minutes. So welcome, Secretary Wormuth.

Sec. Wormuth: Thank you. It's so good to be back.

Ms. Spaulding: So, we're going to get into these meaty issues about the U.S. Army's posture in this uncertain time of strategic competition. But I want to start first with something a little more personal. Would really love to hear your story about how you became interested in national security, and specifically in serving in the Department of Defense. And kind of, who were your role models and whose influence maybe helped shape the way you think about your current role?

Sec. Wormuth: Sure. Well, I got interested probably in national security when I was in college. Not to date myself but, you know, I was finishing up college in the waning years of the Cold War. I actually did my junior year abroad in Paris

and was there the year the Berlin Wall came down. And I think, you know, that really started cementing my broad international affairs interest into a more national security realm.

And in my very early years I was fortunate meet a woman named Joan Rohlfing, who went to the same graduate program that I was in. And Joan had gone into the Office of Secretary of Defense through the Presidential Management Internship Program. She came and talked about the work she was doing, and I thought that is what I want to do. But I was also very, very lucky. In my early years at DOD, I worked for Michèle Flournoy, you know, who obviously has had an amazing career and has mentored, you know, hundreds if not thousands of young women and men.

I worked for a fantastic assistant secretary named Ted Warner, who was a fantastic mentor. And I've just been lucky over the years. I got to work with Denis McDonough and Susan Rice at the NSC and learned a lot from them. Bill Burns, who's the director of the CIA now, you know, I was very fortunate to spend a little time working with Bill. And he's the consummate diplomat. So, I've been really lucky to cross paths with some great people.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Great names, all great folks. And I had the privilege of chatting with Michèle Flournoy, as part of this whole series, as well. And she's been such a role model for so many of us.

Sec. Wormuth: Absolutely.

Ms. Spaulding Yeah.

So, you've had an opportunity over many years to see the evolution and changes in doctrine that have happened. And right now, a lot of currency attached to the concept of integrated deterrence. So, talk to us a little bit about how you think about that, in terms of how you posture the U.S. Army in the context of integrated deterrence.

Sec. Wormuth: Sure. Well, you know, integrated deterrence, I think, for the Army, means really, how do we bring all of our tools together across domains, across geographic theaters, across the temporal spectrum, you know, to really have the greatest deterrent effect. And so, what we're really trying to do is synchronize and coordinate – you know, for example, we have something called the multi-domain task force, which has kinetic capabilities, like long-range fires, but it also has non-kinetic capabilities in the area of information, operations, intelligence, space. And so, that's an example of sort of, you know, a particular formation that actually, I think, has, you know, an integrated deterrence approach to sort of operating.

But really, what we're thinking of more broadly is, how do we plan our exercises and activities, across time and geographic space, to have the greatest effect? So, it's – you know, I think it's an advancement of – and you know, we've spent a lot of time over the decades thinking about engagement, and building partner capacity, but we haven't always necessarily synchronized our activities from one theater to the other.

So now, we're looking at, not just, you know, for U.S. Army Pacific, what are we doing in that region, and what kinds of messages does it send to China, but how does that integrate and synchronize with what we're doing back here in CONUS, to try to develop new weapons capabilities, to try to create the greatest deterrent effects?

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. It sounds ambitious but makes perfect sense. And sounds like something that absolutely needs to be done.

Let's focus in now on – we'll have a few questions around Ukraine, not surprisingly. And one of the things that's interesting, I think, is the kind of differing views about what we should take from Russia's performance in Ukraine so far, right?

So, there are those who say, you know, Russia's sort of incompetence, or poor performance, in Ukraine is a clear reflection of the fact that they are not as serious a threat. And we ought to turn our attention, not pay so much attention to Europe, but instead, divert our attention to China, where the real threat is.

Others argue that, not so fast, the fact that Putin has met with failures in Ukraine may actually make him more dangerous, may make him willing to take greater risks, as he seeks to find ways to compensate for that failure, and that, in fact, Europe and the countries in that region may be under greater threat. Maybe it's a little bit of each.

What's your thought? What do you see from your perch?

Sec. Wormuth: Well, I mean, I do think the Russians have performed, you know, pretty poorly on the battlefield. So, there is that you know. And I think it's important that we go back with our intelligence community, and sort of look at the assessments that we had of the Russian military prior to a year ago, and you know, and what happened.

At the same time, I'm – you know, I don't think we can count Putin out by any means. I don't think we have the luxury of being able to focus exclusively on the Indo-Pacific, frankly, much as we might like to. I mean, if you look at the track record of Putin and Russia, you know, they went into Georgia in 2008. They went into Ukraine for the first time in 2014. I was in the Obama

administration for that. You know, I think, however the war in Ukraine resolves itself in, you know, in the next year or two, I think we have to think very seriously and be very concerned about the possibility that Putin will try again to retake territory in Ukraine.

You know, I think it will be challenging for the Russian army, in particular, to rebuild itself, because of the sanctions and things like that. But Putin is doing everything he can, you know, to get – to get material support from wherever he can find it, whether it's North Korea, Iran, or other places. And I think he'll continue to pose a threat that we will need to grapple with. And you know, he's thrown his army into the meat grinder, but you know, again, historically, look at the Russians and the number of Russians, you know, who were killed in World War II, you know. Mass has a – quantity has a quality of its own, and Putin is clearly not afraid to throw his young men into the meat grinder as cannon fodder.

But he hasn't really used much of his air force, or his navy, or his, you know, cyber capabilities, as you know very well. So, all of that is still there, and I think, you know, we would be foolish to not be concerned about those capabilities.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. So, you mentioned that there will be – it will be important for our intelligence community and across government to – as appropriate, to go back and figure out, you know, what lessons to really learn from what's happened there. But are there lessons we already can take away from what we've seen, and what are some of the most important, maybe, for the U.S. Army?

Sec. Wormuth: Absolutely there are lessons that we can already learn from this, and I would say, for the Army, one of the most important lessons is, you know, that old saying that amateurs focus on strategy, but professionals focus on logistics. And I think if you look at what has happened in Ukraine, you know, it is logistics, logistics, logistics. And as we think about the Indo-Pacific and the possibility of a war in that theater if that were come to pass, the logistics problem will be even more challenging.

So I think for us in the Army, what has happened in Ukraine underscores how important it is for us to focus on what we call, in DOD, contested logistics; the idea that, you know, we will no longer have the space and time that we had, for example, in the Middle East to build up, you know, very large forward operating bases and be able to sort of move supplies here and there without any challenges. That will not be the case going forward. So, I think that's a big lesson.

Another big lesson, obviously, is the importance of unmanned aerial systems; whether, you know, they can be used, if you will – you know, they can be a

tool for advantage in terms of being able to help us with ISR, to, obviously, deliver kinetic payloads, but they're also a threat, clearly. And so, we in the Army are very focused on the counter-UAS problem. I think we also see a lesson there about the importance of asymmetric capabilities and how to use things like Javelins and Stingers again against much, you know, more powerful weapon systems.

I think another important lesson that we've seen in Ukraine is how the battlefield is going to be much more transparent than it has been in the past. And some of that is about, you know, the ubiquitousness of sensors and the ability to sort of fuse open-source information. You know, it's going to be a lot harder to hide our formations on the battlefield than it has been in the past, and we're also – you know, our soldiers are going to have to be a lot more concerned about their own signatures. You know, part of the way we've been able – the Ukrainians have been able to target the Russians is when the Russian soldiers get on Facebook and post pictures. So, there is a lot for us to think about there.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. That last point, I think, is particularly interesting. I've been talking for over a decade about a concept called training to fight in the light – basically learning to operate with fewer secrets –

Sec. Wormuth: Yeah.

Ms. Spaulding: – assuming that we're in a transparent world, right? And to some degree, democracies have an advantage in an increasingly transparent world.

You mentioned building partner capacity and how we need to be thinking about that differently and in a more holistic way, you said, as part of our integrated deterrence. Tell us a little bit more about how your thinking has evolved about how the U.S. Army can better prepare to work with and build partner capacity around the world, and why that's so important.

Sec. Wormuth: Well, for us – you know, I think it's critically important. I gave a talk just the other day about the role of the Army in the Indo-Pacific, and one of the things I talked about was, you know, as we campaign, as we compete for advantage, you know, prior to a conflict, one of the things that we are doing is building up our network of allies and partners, and that's a huge advantage for the United States, I think, you know, vis-à-vis the PRC, for example. And it also helps us facilitate getting, you know, more access in regions where we think we might need it, and so we – in the Army we have units called Security Force Assistance Brigades, which are – you know, interestingly, we built them back during sort of the last two decades, and they were really built to sort of help work with the Afghan security forces, for example. But they've been incredibly useful formations to really get down on the ground and partner with countries, you know, whether its Thailand, Indonesia, the

Philippines, and really work to build the capacity of our partners, you know, whether it's in Europe or whether it's in AFRICOM or whether it's in the Indo-Pacific. We develop, you know, much better interoperability. And, you know, I think that both complicates the decision making of our adversaries because they have to think about, you know, if we get into a conflict, it won't just be with the United States of America potentially, it will be with these others. But it also demonstrates, I think, in a meaningful way that our forces have interoperability and could fight together if we need to.

And I think what we're also learning is – and I think we've seen this over the years with Afghanistan, with the work we've done with the Iraqis over the years, also with the Syrian democratic forces: We don't always have to build our partners' capacity to look exactly like ours. You know, sometimes we need to make, I think, sober-eyed assessments about what works for them on the ground in their governmental constructs. It doesn't always have to be a mirror image of the United States Army.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah, great point. Great point.

So, let's talk a little bit about – you talked about the importance of logistics. Closely related is supply chain and some of the struggles that we've seen with regard to supply chain disruptions caused by events in Ukraine, caused by – or shortages caused by tensions with China and sanctions, et cetera. You recently noted the importance of leveling up the defense industrial base. So, talk to me a little bit about how you're thinking about that problem, and particularly, what does the defense industry need to take away from this?

Sec. Wormuth: Well, it's really another important lesson coming out of Ukraine, which is the whole kind of just-in-time logistics and sort of just-in-time industrial base, it's probably not the model that we should be using, and so we have really been focused in the last six to nine months on investing in our organic industrial base in the Army to try to create greater production capacity, and we've also partnered very, very intensively with a lot of the big companies in defense industry, because, you know, I remember when Secretary Ash Carter was the secretary of defense, you know, he would sometimes say, you know, great, we've got these fifth-generation aircrafts, but if we don't have missiles to launch from them, what good are they? You know, he had concerns, you know, even years ago, about did we have the kind of magazine depth that we needed? And I think, you know, the answer is frankly no, we didn't. And of course, coming out of the pandemic, or being in the pandemic, a lot of these companies experienced quite a bit of supply chain fragility.

So there's a lot more work to be done, I think, to ramp up our industrial base, to be able to both, you know, continue to supply Ukraine with what they need, to replenish our stockpiles, which definitely need to be replenished, and also to, frankly, you know, deepen or expand our munition stockpiles,

because I think, you know, we are more likely to see a protracted conflict than potentially we expected, so there's a lot of work to be done there, but the Army's really in a full-court press on that front.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah, great. Well, and given that, you know, we're likely to see this engagement, engagements elsewhere in the world potentially extended, you know, the strength of your workforce is critically important and there's been a lot of reporting in the media about shortfalls in recruitment. And so, talk to us a little bit about what you see as the Army's value proposition, if you will, to Generation Z and then I guess the next one is going to be Generation Alpha. You know, how do you make that pitch to young people?

Sec. Wormuth: I think we really have to reintroduce the United States Army to America, and not just young people, but, you know, parents and other influencers like coaches and guidance counselors. The market research that we've done indicates that a lot of Americans just don't understand the military, don't understand all of the opportunities that the U.S. Army in particular offers. So, you know, I would say the value proposition is, you know, we are an un-limiter. You know, we offer 178 different military occupational specialties. Yes, you can be in the infantry, yes, you can drive tanks or fly helicopters, but you can also be a data scientist, a coder, an engineer, a doctor, a nurse, a lawyer, even a chef. You know, the list goes on and on. You can be a journalist. You can do audio-visual.

You know, we still have the G.I. Bill. We have tuition assistance. So, I think sometimes families think that going into the Army will keep their kids from going to college. But in fact, the opposite is true. You know, we can help kids go to college. We can help dependents and spouses be able to go to college. So, I just – and we also offer a lot of incredible practical benefits.

I mean, in addition to, you know, 30 days of paid vacation, something I'm really proud of is we have just started, along with our sister services, offering 12 weeks of paid parental leave not just for moms but also for, you know, non-birth parents. So, this is on top of, you know, convalescent leave. Basically now, if you're a mom who has a new child or an adopted child, you can have 18 weeks of paid leave. You know, that's a heck of a lot of more than I had when I was working in government and had my two children. So, you know, you don't have to choose between the Army and a family. And that's another thing. But we really need to get the word out about that, because I think a lot of Americans just don't know.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Yeah. It's – your last point there is particularly compelling. I recently had an opportunity to moderate a panel with women in defense. And this issue of choosing between your family and career has been a very real issue for folks. So good for you. That's a kind of great step forward.

It's been just a little over a year since you released your six key objectives for the force. Two of them are very much connected – building positive command climates at scale and reducing harmful behaviors. So, can you speak to why those made it on the list, why you think those are so important? And I'll give you the opportunity, if you'd like, to address those who say that, you know, focusing on those kinds of things will somehow hamper the effectiveness of the – of accomplishing the mission.

Sec. Wormuth: I think it's really important that we, in the Army, build a positive command climate and reduce harmful behaviors for two major reasons. First of all is, you know, fundamentally what the Army has to do is build cohesive teams that are disciplined, trained, and fit. You know, we've got to have people who are, you know, willing to put their lives on the line in the battlefield. And to do that, you have to trust, you know, your battle buddy on your left and your battle buddy on the right. And so, to be able to do that, to have that trust, we have to have our soldiers being in, you know, a positive command climate where they feel safe and respected and are not worried about, you know, mistreatment, sexual harassment, sexual assault, et cetera. That is, you know, fundamentally one of the reasons why we have to do this.

I think the second reason we have to do this is it connects directly to recruiting and retention. You know, if parents, again – and I hear this – I've spent a lot of time in the last six months talking to recruiters and hearing what, you know, they hear from families. If parents worry fundamentally that their daughter or son is going to be sexually harassed or is going to be discriminated against in the United States Army, they're not going to encourage them to join us. And if our soldiers are experiencing those kinds of harmful behaviors in our force, they're not going to stay. You know, we're not going to be able to retain them. And given that we're facing the most significant recruiting challenge, I would say, in decades, I think it's pretty important that we, you know, try to do as much as we can to reduce those harmful behaviors.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. So, the National Commission on Public Service – or, National Commission on Public and Military Service of a few years ago looked at how do we get more young people to want to be involved in military and public service. And I think they were a little surprised by the end of their effort to realize that their number-one recommendation was to reinvigorate civics education in this country. And that's something that we've taken onboard here at CSIS. We've had a series – a strategic dialogue on civics as a national security imperative. And you're in a great position to sort of think about that. And I wonder what your thoughts are on how you might see civics as being important generally, civics across the country, for Americans of all ages. And

the lack of civics education for decades now, a robust civics education, and its impact on our ability to meet national security challenges.

Sec. Wormuth: I think it's really important. You know, we talk a lot – when you talk about the challenges the military is having with recruiting, there's a lot of focus on what we call propensity to serve. You know, the number of young Americans who are interested in military service. And it's pretty darn small. It's as small as it's ever been. It's, like, 9 percent of young people. But it speaks to, I think, a broader dearth in our public right now of interest in public service. And, I think, you know, educating people about civics, about participating in our democracy, participating in building our communities and our civic society is part of, you know, what sets the conditions or builds the foundation for people to want to serve, broadly.

And I gave a speech just a week or two ago at Whitney Young High School in Chicago, and what I really emphasized was public service. It wasn't so much a pitch to those kids, you know, hey, come join the Army. It was a pitch about think about public service, you know, whether it's in your local community, whether it's – you know, you look now and we're having trouble recruiting nurses. We're having trouble recruiting first responders, law enforcement. You know, we're having trouble recruiting people into the military, and I think part of it is because people don't hold institutions, whether it's at the local, state, or national level in the same regard that they did 20 years ago and I think part of that is because we're not emphasizing civics the way we did, at least when I was in school, and that was mandatory.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Yeah. And beyond recruitment, I think my sense is that civics can help instill and remind us of our shared aspirations, that sense of shared national identity. In fact, a recent survey showed bipartisan views that civics was the most important way we could build that sense of national identity.

Engaging in our workforce in ways that build those civic skills of civil discourse and respect for the rule of law, et cetera, can contribute to this cohesive workforce, whether it's in the private sector or in the military.

And so, do you see a connection between your priorities for that command climate and reducing bad behaviors and making sure that those serving in national security positions, civilian and military, have a good grounding in understanding what our democracy is all about?

Sec. Wormuth: A hundred percent. I mean, you know, civil-military relations is incredibly important. You know, I think there have been a lot of strains in that regard in the last several years. I think it's incredibly important that we continue to have the military remain apolitical. There's been a lot of strain there, I think, also.

You know, when you see a lot of polling about Americans' declining trust in institutions, you know, the military has been one of the institutions that's been most highly regarded and I think to the extent that we see a little bit of a decline there in trust it's around Americans' concern about the politicization of military leaders and part of, I think, why that's happening is because we are in such a hyper partisan environment and we are, you know, so divided in many ways that I think, again, you know, we really need to find ways to – you know, to rebuild the center, and I think civics and an emphasis on civil discourse would help us do that.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Yeah. Great.

Well, shifting gears, the 1970 Gates Commission talked about, you know, moving from nonmonetary incentives. But these are potential ways to attract recruits and specifically the quality-of-life programs that are always on the budgetary chopping block, right, but play an important role here as well and particularly as we look at the 50th anniversary of the all-volunteer force, right, and the challenges that you face. But things like childcare centers and barracks and housing, you know, how difficult is it to convince Congress that these are equally important to the effectiveness of our ability to project power?

Sec. Wormuth: You know, happily, I would say we get really good support for the most part from folks on Capitol Hill for quality-of-life initiatives, you know, whether it's – you know, Congress has been hugely focused on housing in the Army.

You know, the Army went through, frankly, quite a housing crisis a couple years before I became secretary of the Army. So, there was a lot of focus on improving family housing. There's been a lot of focus on the quality of our barracks. But Congress has been very supportive of giving us funding for housing, for child development centers.

The challenge really, Suzanne, is, you know, balancing. I mean, the Army has an enormous budget in many ways. It's about a hundred and eight five billion dollars a year, which is more than a lot of countries around the world. But we're also – you know, we're an army of almost a million people across the active, Guard, and Reserves.

We do take care of our soldiers and families well, I'm proud to say, and that is expensive, and when you combine all of that with also our very ambitious modernization and transformation agenda and the money that we need to spend on readiness and, obviously, on our operational deployments the challenge is always how do you balance all of that, you know, and I would – you know, for example, we have a – we're spending about a billion dollars a year on barracks over the next 10 years. I would like to be able to spend more annually on barracks than I do right now, but if I were to do that I

would have to take, you know, dollars away from some of our long-range fires programs, for example, or our integrated air and missile defense programs. And you know, we need to be transforming the Army to be ready for the fights of the future. So, the challenge is always where do you put that, you know, incremental dollar.

Ms. Spaulding: Yeah. Yeah, those are complex decisions, and I know you've built a good team to help advise you on those things.

And thinking about the teams in national security, we've got just a minute or so left but I wanted to give you an opportunity – this is Smart Women, Smart Power – to – any sort of closing thoughts that you have on the importance of getting more women into national security and perhaps how – and whether you think that the fact that you've come up through this defense world as a woman has had any impact on sort of how you come to this job.

Sec. Wormuth: Well, I think, you know, I've been used to being the, you know – often, one of only one or two women around the meeting table since I was in my mid-twenties. (Laughs.) Now, admittedly, I thought by the time I was getting into my fifties – I won't say mid-fifties – there would be more women around the table than there are. But I would say actually, you know, I am blessed. I have a number of great senior women on my team. So, things are changing.

And you know, I think it's really important to have different perspectives, you know, whether it's different – whether it's men and women, or people from different backgrounds, different sets of experiences. You know, there's so much research that talks about how, you know, diverse teams are more effective teams, more profitable teams, and I certainly see that in the really diverse, you know, set of folks that I've got in the Army.

Ms. Spaulding: Outstanding. Great.

Well, Secretary, thank you so much. You've got a(n) awful lot on your plate, and we're so grateful that you took time out today to have this conversation with us. Really appreciate it. Great to see you. Great to see you. Yeah.

Sec. Wormuth: My pleasure. Great to be here.

(END)